

Airmen in
Central
America
provide a
different
kind of
support
to the
war on
terror

Staff Sgt. Yyolany Estrada, holding 3-year-old Amanda, never dreamed she'd return to Honduras to help her people. But when she got the chance, she jumped at it. The medical technician was born in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. Assisting at a free clinic in Rauteca was an eye-opener. "I was happy to see how many people we were able to help," she said.

The Other Front Lines

by Louis A. Arana-Barradas
photos by Master Sgt. Lono Kollars

Staff Sgt. Yyolany Estrada hustled from one patient to another. She was busy translating — from English to Spanish, and vice versa — for several doctors and patients.

She had lots of work because there were hundreds of sick children at the makeshift clinic in the mountain village of Rauteca, Honduras. Many were rail thin with big black eyes made bigger by malnutrition. Some coughed. Others looked scared. And some cried in their mothers' arms.

Despite the anguish around her, Sergeant Estrada smiled, which seemed to soothe the children.

As the young medical technician surveyed the multitude of children, the last thing on her mind was that she was on the "other" front lines of the global war on terrorism. There was no shooting. No roadside bombs to contend with. There were only people in need.

So she went to another table, and helped a U.S. Army doctor diagnose a little boy's ailment. In hushed tones, she reassured the child and his awestruck mother.

"I told you this would not hurt," she reassured 2-year-old Esquel Mejias, as the doctor checked his heartbeat with a stethoscope. The diagnosis: an upper respiratory infection. The mother was visibly relieved when the sergeant told her it wasn't serious. Then the doctor wrote a prescription for free antibiotics and cough syrup.

The 24-year-old sergeant, from the 59th Surgical Operations Squadron at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, was part of an 18-member U.S. military medical team working in and around Rauteca. Born and raised in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, this was the first time she'd been home since leaving at age 16. She related to the children and just couldn't do enough to help them.

"People forget these [impoverished] areas exist," she said. "They're so poor. It's rewarding to see the difference we can make in their lives."

The medical team — made up of Air Force and Army



Staff Sgt. Sergio Norat, a medical technician and international health specialist, explains to a mother how to administer a dose of antibiotic for her daughter. The sergeant helped pass out free drugs to people who saw U.S. military doctors at Rauteca, Honduras.

pediatricians, medical technicians, dieticians and students — traveled to the coffee-growing region in the Montecillo Mountains in late April and early May. Most came from the San Antonio Military Pediatric Center, which merges the pediatric services of Brooke Army Medical Center at Fort Sam Houston and Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland.

While in Honduras, the team received all the support it needed from the Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Marines of Joint Task Force-Bravo at Soto Cano Air Base, in Comayagua.

The visit was invaluable to the locals and the team, said Lt. Col. (Dr.) Douglas Lougee, team chief and Wilford Hall pediatrician. Besides training under austere conditions, the team also conducted a malnutrition study of about 500 local children for the Honduran government. The team found the malnutrition rate was about 7 percent higher than in the rest of the country. Coffee prices dictate the

"People forget these [impoverished] areas exist."

At nearly 9,000-feet long, Soto Cano Air Base has the longest runway in Honduras. Each week, a KC-10 Extender “rotator” flies in from Charleston Air Force Base, S.C., to deliver new folks and supplies. Numerous U.S. and Honduran agencies use the base runway to launch medical, counterdrug and humanitarian relief operations. “We couldn’t do these [MEDRETE] visits without Soto Cano. They host us and provide all the support we need,” said Lt. Col. (Dr.) Douglas Lougee, medical team chief.



malnutrition level in the area, he said. In late May, coffee prices were low, so there was less money to buy food.

The Hondurans welcome the aid. And for some children, it was their first visit to a doctor.

“It’s by God’s grace these doctors are here helping us,” Mrs. Mejias said in Spanish. “May God bless them.”

“It’s by God’s grace these doctors are here helping us.”

It was muggy, and mothers stood in the pharmacy

line fanning their children with pieces of cardboard. There was no way to mistake any of the people as potential terrorists. And no team member could

imagine they were on the front lines of the global war on terrorism. But that’s just what they were doing in the remote village, about a million miles from Iraq.

Most Americans don’t link terrorism with Latin America. But it’s in areas like this one — with widespread poverty, hunger and disease — that terrorism can gain a toehold. In fact, terrorist groups operate from Canada to South America.

It’s a reason why President Bush said America must “eliminate terrorist threats abroad so we do not have to face them at home.”

In the mountains of Honduras, American forces working for U.S. Southern Command are doing just that. It’s one of the command’s main missions in

Latin America, said Lt. Gen. Randall Mark Schmidt, commander of 12th Air Force, Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Ariz., and U.S. Southern Command Air Forces. There are five bases in Latin America from which the command operates. At some, the emphasis is on counterterrorist operations, theater security cooperation activities and support of the national counterdrug strategy.

“MEDRETEs,” as the medical readiness training exercises are called, are another strategy. They provide care to people in need. This helps better people’s lives. But they offer more than that. They also help “build stability and trust, while reducing the recruitment pool for terrorists,” the general said.



Children wait their turn to see doctors hosting a clinic in Rauteca. Patients came from miles around for the free care. Soto Cano supported the 18-member Air Force and Army team of pediatricians, medical technicians, dieticians and students from Lackland Air Force Base, Texas.



Staff Sgt. Amber Charlesworth, an air traffic control watch supervisor, checks the ground control approach radar for incoming air traffic at Soto Cano. During the dry season, there is plenty of activity at the base, like medical, counterdrug and humanitarian support operations.

Sergeant Estrada took a long hot shower when she got back to Soto Cano. Soon, she’d be back home and with her husband, Farid, also from Honduras. At breakfast, dressed in fresh civilian clothes, she said her first medrete was tough. She’d been unprepared for what she’d experienced. But, she said, she’ll always remember the help the team provided. And the malnourished girl the team saved.

“What would happen to these people if we weren’t here to help?” she said.

Whatever the answer, Southern Command will keep sending teams into the region to help. And at Soto Cano, the troops are ready to provide these troops the support they need. ♀



Staff Sgt. Charles Heairet, a meteorological and navigational aid systems technician, does a routine check on radar equipment. With so much humidity and rain in the area, technicians must

constantly check on meteorological and navigational systems to ensure they work, since the base runway is always open to support any U.S. Southern Command operation in the region.

'Gateway' to Central America

About a three-hour drive from Rauteca — part of the way over a dangerous, rut-filled road through the mountains — is Soto Cano Air Base, home of Joint Task Force-Bravo

It's Southern Command's most forward element and its Airmen, Soldiers, Sailors and Marines keep open a nearly 9,000-foot runway.

That makes the base the command's "gateway" to Central America. And the more than 600 American task force troops there are on call to provide on demand support to

any mission. They are Southern Command's "first response" force, said Army Col. Rick Bassett, task force commander.

That first response is usually for disaster relief operations, he said. For example, the task force was first to react when Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras in 1998. But the task force also supports counterdrug and humanitarian missions, provides search and rescue, and offers a U.S. presence in the region.

Counterdrug support

While the task force isn't directly involved in the counterdrug mission — like smashing cocaine labs or eliminating terrorists — it supports those who do. It pro-

vides command and control and airlift to U.S. and host-nation drug enforcement agencies, sometimes on a daily basis.

"There are a lot of narcoterrorists using the narcotics trade to supply money to terrorist groups," said Lt. Col. Jim Hetherington, 612th Air Base Squadron commander. "So we're right in the heart of the counter narcotrafficking missions."

The squadron's 250 Airmen operate, maintain and keep open the runway. Plus, they support the Army's 1st Battalion, 228th Aviation Regiment, and its CH-47 Chinook and UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters. The Army helicopters bear the burden of getting people to and from counterdrug operations

and humanitarian relief areas.

Working a "hub-and-spoke" operation, the task force allows U.S. Transportation Command to provide airlift and sealift support to U.S. operations in Central America. So the task force has a large sphere of influence, Colonel Bassett said.

Setting the example

"When people in this region see Americans, we're the ones they see," Colonel Bassett said. "So our responsibility, and the example that we set, is very key."

But on a rainy day, that isn't as apparent. The base heats up during the dry season, when everyone wants to train there. That's when aircraft dot the flightline.



Senior Airman Ben Roundtree, a firefighter, rappels off Soto Cano's search and rescue training tower. Though Army-run, the base's search and rescue team is a volunteer affair, relying heavily on Airmen and Marines.

But during the rainy season, the base turns to training and maintenance.

Though the work pace slows when the rains come, that doesn't mean the base can't spin up at a moment's notice, Colonel Bassett said. That is the challenge to which his troops must adapt.

"We're like any team. We bring our own sets of skills and duty to our mission here," the colonel said. The task force needs that, he said, because "we have a big mission in this theater."

Still, the task force is half a world away from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan. But the commander reminds new troops that they're doing their part to stop terrorism.

"What we do — as far as the global war on terrorism — is counter narcoterrorism," Colonel Bassett said. "We're attempting to stop the flow of drugs, particularly the money involved in the flow of drugs, from transiting this portion of the world."

Tech. Sgt. Dario Garcia is noncommissioned officer in charge of joint task force operations. He said not always knowing how counterdrug operations turn out doesn't stop troops from "being proud to be part of the mission."

"We'll do anything to stop terrorists from funding their operations," the sergeant said.

— Louis Arana-Barradas